



The Fragility of Meaning: Three Films by Paul Cox

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The Fragility of Meaning:

THREE FILMS BY PAUL COX

Quietly, almost obliquely during the past couple of years, as three of his movies, *Lonely Hearts*, *Man of Flowers*, and *My First Wife* have opened here, Dutch-Australian director Paul Cox has been revealing his bemusingly unclassifiable talent to American audiences. By turns mordant, poetic, hilarious, gnomic, and angry, these small-scale productions (each reportedly shot for \$1 million or less in as few as three weeks) tunnel into those old perplexities, isolation and loneliness, but at skewed angles and with a bracingly idiosyncratic spirit to match the quirky, sometimes dumbfounding crochets, obsessions, and rages of their characters.

In *Lonely Hearts*, Peter, a 50-year-old bachelor piano tuner, launches into a life of his own after his mother dies. He meets Patricia, an almost Victorian frightened mid-thirties spinster, through a dating bureau, and the two of them tumble into a maze of tragicomic miscommunication as each tries to slough off a deadening past and come to grips with commingled fear and desire. *Man of Flowers* takes us into the bizarre private world of Charles Bremer, an aging aesthete, newly rich, profoundly eccentric, and the outré relationship which arises between him and a young model whom he pays to strip for him once a week to the music of Donizetti. By contrast, *My First Wife* begins in utter conventionality with a long marriage but quickly veers into the varieties and extremes of loss, shame, and self-destruction when the marriage abruptly disintegrates. "Why should we be alone in a society that has all the means to communicate so well?" Cox has wondered aloud. And he has offered a couple of answers: "It has puzzled me in modern society how much we long for warmth, for love, and how within this society, we are usually conditioned into wanting, which makes us consumers, so we want another car or a new dress. I'm quite sure that people would much rather be loved than have a new car or a new dress. . . . I think most people

so want something to make them stop *wanting things* and to think about why they live the way they do, even if it means they only shrug and decide they like it all just as it is." Worthy sentiments, but entirely misleading if they make anybody expect single-minded, Marxist-oriented dissections of latter-day capitalism. For Cox's work (or these examples of it, at any rate, the only ones I have seen) has locked into something other than society as the source of isolation and loneliness. Idiosyncrasy, solipsism, eccentricity—these are the salient traits of the people who fire Cox's imagination, for no matter what their social context, to him these are the bedrock elements of all human feelings and entanglements.

Born Paul Henricus Benedictus Cox in Venlo, Holland, on April 16, 1940, the future film-maker, whose father ran a production firm that made documentaries, grew up in war-disrupted Europe "in an atmosphere very much like the house of flowers. My childhood was steeped in moody, dark, bitter memories." Some of these, he has said, derived from a favorite attic where as a boy he spent many solitary hours playing in the darkness with an old movie projector—a circumstance interestingly similar to Ingmar Bergman's own descriptions of his early contacts with film. "I was always impressed by how clear everything was in the dark," Cox put it years later.

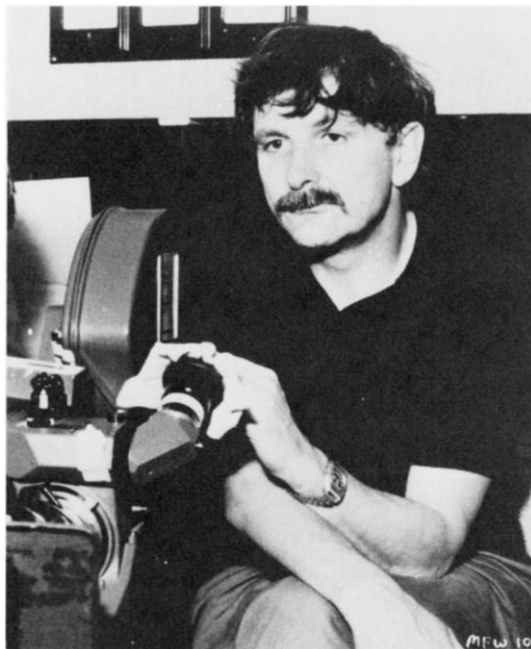
A foreign-exchange program first took him to Australia as a student in 1963. Two years later, he returned as a settler, opening a photography studio whose success helped to finance early experiments as a movie-making hobbyist. ("I always say that if you want to do something really seriously, do it as a hobby. . . . I'm not a film-maker out of ambition. I never thought I would be a film-maker. It's pure compulsion. I have no option.")

Starting in 1965 with short personal films and documentaries, Cox eventually made his first feature, *Illuminations* (1976), which has

been described as a “nightmarishly surreal story about an Australian man and a Hungarian woman living together in a volatile love relationship.” Along with more shorts, two additional features followed, *Inside Looking Out* (1977), another examination of a collapsing marriage, and *Kostas* (1979), a story about a Greek journalist refugee from the rightwing regime who comes to Australia and falls in love with an upper-middle-class Australian divorcee. Most recently, Cox has completed *Cactus*, a 1986 release about a Frenchwoman (Isabelle Huppert) who visits Australia and becomes involved with a blind man (Robert Menzies, grandson of former prime minister Robert Menzies).

Viewing himself as an outsider (Melbourne-based) in the Sydney-centered Australian film establishment, Cox has forged a unit of recurrent collaborators, among them actors Norman Kaye and Wendy Hughes, Russian immigrant cinematographer Yuri Sokol, screenwriter Bob Ellis (who recently became a director himself), editor Tim Lewis, associate producer Tony Llewellyn Jones, and producer Jane Ballantyne, who have enabled him to work steadily, cheaply, and independently. “Money doesn’t make good films,” Cox has stated. “The more money there is, the more people indulge, the more time is wasted . . . You can make a very fine film with seven people—a basic crew. The more people there are, the bigger the threat to the peace of mind of the production.” Reportedly, he wants to make a movie about Vincent Van Gogh next.

If one word can sum up *My First Wife*, that word is “relentless.” Few of the many movies which have tackled the emotional maelstrom churned up when a marriage explodes can equal its head-on plunge into the embarrassment, the laceration, and the grim comedy of primal emotions suddenly stripped bare and flayed out of all control. John (John Hargreaves), a composer with a choral piece in rehearsal and a flourishing classical program on the radio, has been so absorbed in his pursuits that he has unwittingly lost the love of his wife Helen (Wendy Hughes), a teacher of English to immigrants and a member of the chorus at his rehearsals. When she ends their ten-year union one night with almost no warn-



Paul Cox

ing, grief and rage consume him immediately and garishly, to his shock and mortification, for everything about the way he looks, moves, and sounds in the terse opening scenes before he learns the truth suggests a man who views himself as consummately poised, reasonable, “together.” Now, as fragments of dormant old memories start flashing through his dreams and his waking thoughts, he practically goes berserk trying to win Helen back: smashing through a door when he finds her with a casual lover, invading her parents’ home to howl in one breath that the marriage is sacred to him while denouncing her in the next as a lying whore who has deceived and killed him. Once, he begs Helen with raw abjectness to make love to him, but after she does, her revulsion at his touch, which she simply cannot mask, stabs at him so deeply that he strikes her. Earlier, Helen had accused him (and justly, it seems) of neglecting their shy young daughter Lucy (Lucy Angwin), but now John, as part of his campaign to regain Helen, starts to lavish extravagant, disorienting devotion on the little girl. And as though this were not enough, he is also enduring a deathwatch with his hospitalized father (Robin Lovejoy).

It all sounds, inescapably, like soap opera in the worst sense, and some people—both



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reviewers and regular moviegoers—have accused Cox of merely spewing *Angst* in all directions, utterly unable to shape it artistically. But control and perspective are precisely what he has brought to this unsparing dissection of a man struggling for both, yet dismally, humiliatingly unable to find them in himself or anywhere else. Part of the reason lies in a cultural contradiction that entraps him. Nowadays, everyone from feminists to publishers of self-help manuals continually urges the emotionally constipated adult male to express his emotions freely. Although *My First Wife* does not show this advice explicitly influencing John, he certainly takes it, and the results are anything but pretty. Like the hero of *Smash Palace*, he holds nothing back. Even the most empathetic viewers undoubtedly cringe at this spectacle at least part of the time (I definitely did) and feel compelled to condemn John as a self-pitying, self-righteous asshole whose “love” is just selfish possessiveness. Helen herself says this, convincingly extending the indictment to men in general. In fact, Cox never evades John’s responsibility for his predicament. Yet this kind of blaming is finally irrelevant to the essential theme of *My First Wife*, which is the fragility of life-sustaining meaning. For John, its fountainheads are marriage, art, and dreams; Cox undermines each.

In its portrait of a suddenly abandoned marriage partner, *My First Wife* inevitably suggests a rawer *Kramer vs. Kramer* or *An Unmarried Woman*, but without their focus on the bereft partner’s fresh start or social backdrop. Instead, Cox looks at the transience of love. We see Helen in bed with a lover (David Cameron) in the first sequence, intercut with John broadcasting at his studio. Thus, when she denies that involvement with another man motivated her decision, we may suspect her of lying. Soon, though, it becomes clear that she is not; her bed partner proves to be just a casual stud. Nor do John’s faults really account for the breakup in any specific way. The issue is the mysterious, unsettling disappearance of love—for all these reasons and for none of them. It just vanished, long ago, and its absence has finally become too demoralizing for her. When her mother, our mirror, presses for some particular motive, Helen simply says, “The loss of love is very real. I miss it.” Or, as one of her students puts it flippily, “It’s been seven years, ten months, and two days since I didn’t love mine suddenly one night.”

Cox contrasts John and Helen as they try to regenerate existential meaning. Helen uncertainly yet forthrightly casts herself free of the dead relationship although she has no substitute at hand. Even when her mother

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asks, appalled, "While his father is dying?" Helen's resolve sticks. However, despite his neglect of his wedlock, John has made it so integral to his identity that its collapse seems like more than just another broken marriage. "*My life, my wife, my marriage, my music,*" he shouts with unabashed egotism, yet he promptly adds that, forced to choose, he would abandon his music and keep his marriage.

But no such choice is available, and John must seek other sources of consolation and insight. Cox has filled the film's sound track (which is also John's personal sound track) with classical music, principally snippets from Gluck's *Orfeo*, the *Carmina Burana*, and Franz Sussmayr's *Grandfather's Birthday Party*, along with Ann Boyd's pointedly entitled song, "As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams." Musically, John dwells in the past; he is comically out of place in a car where rock blares and an eccentric, slouch-hatted drunk croons a bluesy ballad. His own composition sounds serenely traditional, like latter-day Gregorian chant, and Cox sometimes cuts directly from bruising marital anger to a smooth, soothing track past the rehearsing singers, who project a calmness that, in this context, feels almost otherworldly.

Gradually, we intuit that classical music matters so deeply to John in part because this

"otherworldly" beauty transports him beyond what he regards as the deadening mundanity of most daily existence, transforming it into genuine life, which for him means an arena where a sense of coherent, resonant, continuous wholeness with the cosmos is possible. John never uses such grandiose language or analyzes this side of himself; nonetheless, his actions bespeak the kind of romantic for whom this notion is not merely an idealistic abstraction, to be sloughed off commonsensically as one matures and "faces reality," but a genuine grail to be pursued with all the fervor he can command.

The price this exacts is a continuous sense of disappointment with life whenever it is (as it generally is) little more than rote existence. In one affecting scene, when he accepts a night's solace with a companionably compassionate woman coworker (Anna Jemison), a new perspective suddenly opens up: perhaps John is taking his troubles too seriously; maybe, after all, he can shake off his agony and discover renewed intimacy or just some easygoing fun with another. But he rejects this opportunity grimly. John cannot, will not just take what life offers; virtually every instant must burst with some measure of perfervid intensity, or he feels naggingly dissatisfied, unsure that he is really alive.

Yet this search for intensity isolates him.

When, for example, recuperating from a suicide attempt, he has a vivid dream-recollection of a treasured instant from his and Helen's shared past (a hazy, shimmering image of dawn light on lake water) and then tries to make her share his response by describing it to her, we (and he) realize how devastatingly inadequate his words are to communicate what it means to him. When he pushes harder, pouring out a fantasy of vanishing into Helen's womb, she can only sidestep him with a deliberately banal question about lunch. Cox gives John's anguished despair its due but never glamorizes it or devalues Helen's suspicion of it. Compared to his extravagant outbursts, her casual remark to her lover when he quails at the prospect of confronting John ("You'll manage, we'll all manage, OK?") may seem coldly shallow. Yet Wendy Hughes's line readings are so alive that we can immediately sense the less gaudy but equally real passion beneath her brittle surface. She and Hargreaves (who also appear as a troubled couple in *Careful, He Might Hear You*) are a fascinating study in contrasted acting styles, she playing suppressed tension off against her elegant carriage, he bursting with bravura yet never losing steely control. *My First Wife* blends their brilliant styles with Cox's formal subtlety to keep us equally conscious of the power and the dementia in John's romanticism.

Cox's handling of John's memories is particularly mesmerizing—for instance, recurring shots of Helen fluffing out a fringe of lace on her wedding gown, Helen irradiated with pain and then ecstasy at the instant of Lucy's birth, overtly erotic glimpses of her breast and her groin, or home-movie-ish imagery of her and a younger Lucy playing on a swing, to cite just a few. Although these montages do not start until the shock of Helen's defection sinks in, Cox is preparing us for his excursions into John's dreamworld even during the movie's opening moments, with a strobic shot of flickering train windows at night under the credits. Later, with John aboard that train, Cox begins inserting another recurrent subliminal image, spidery branches blurrily twisting by outside, which along with others like it acts as a catalyst for the slipstreams of more personal images that assault John afterwards. "Assault" is the right word, for

these dream montages erupt on their own, and far from offering comfort or reconciliation to his loss, they only intensify his pain.

Cox uses this device to crystallize his concern with the evanescence of meaning. I have heard some viewers criticize these images as confusing, distracting "symbolism." But they are not symbols; they are John's actual, distorted memories of moments when he felt perfectly happy—more than that, harmoniously fused with life. But, in addition, the essential point about these montages (communicated tacitly by their hectic, deliberately rough cutting style and blurry, shaky camera-work) is that they are fading, losing their power to move him, even as they play and replay obsessively in his mind. The mood they create is a desperate one, a sense of grabbing futilely at wisps of lovely past instants, out of a desperate, ridiculous yearning to recreate them somehow, or at least to preserve their full resonance. It is the direct opposite of the *mono no aware* of films like *Tokyo Story*, in which sadness at the transience of life shades at last into an acceptance of transience as an essential element of beauty. To John, however, his dreams are an unbearable reminder that he has constructed an elaborate life upon literally nothing.

For a while, the paralleling of John's struggle to regain Helen with his father's final decline seems intended to foster a heavy-handed "seize the day" slant on the material. Unaware of his son's problems, John's father even states, "In the end, the family is important . . . the family in the end is everything." In conjunction with a story John tells Helen about how his mother, while young, had an extramarital affair which kindled another brand of crazed passion in his father, this line seems to foretell a coming to terms over the old man's grave. Yet after he dies, the mood does not coalesce—by design. John's sister appears for the first time, her late arrival onscreen unobtrusively undermining the father's paean to the family. At the funeral, John tries to rise to the occasion with a wise, eloquent eulogy, but all he can produce is a threadbare invocation of his father's honesty and stature, and then a clumsily bitter quotation, "The farce is almost over." During the burial, John's mother lapses into a fit of flailing



MY FIRST WIFE: John and his father.

grief, despite her own memories of another love, but Cox's camera, coolly gazing from a distance, makes it look almost grotesque. And as John leaves the cemetery, hand in hand with Lucy and Helen, the camera cranes grandly upward, accompanied by music from a children's orchestra in which Lucy plays. Yet these devices leave us not with the sense of serenity that they would ordinarily communicate but with a throbbing malaise and loss which will linger for John well beyond the last fade-out. (As Stanley Kauffman has pointed out, the movie's optimism lies entirely in its title.)

The uncompromising rigor of *My First Wife* sent me back to *Lonely Hearts* and *Man of Flowers* to reassess my initial lukewarmness toward them. *Lonely Hearts* had struck me the way it did many others—as an amusing, touching, but finally negligible “little people” movie along the lines of *Marty*, distinguishable from it mainly by its open attention to the couple's blocked sexual longings and by its darts of unpredictable, oddball humor, such as showing Peter, who has prankishly pretended to be blind while out on one of his piano tuning calls, nonchalantly get into his car after he has finished and drive away as his confused customer gapes. *Man of Flowers* seemed clearly richer and more ambitious, but it also appeared to be playing a very tricky game with borderline perversion, tiptoeing to the brink of seriously exploring it while making it in the end merely charming, even cute. But reseeing the movies in the light of *My First Wife* showed me that I was wrong about them both.

Not totally. *Lonely Hearts* still seems minor, humanely yet at last too easily sympathetic towards two small souls groping after a place in a cold world. But now it clearly possesses seeds which have germinated luxuriantly in its two successors. Foremost among them is eccentricity, which Peter Thompson (Norman Kaye) seems intended to exemplify in moments like his blind man's prank, although (and this is the film's severe limitation) he never truly develops far beyond *Lonely Guyism*. Like *Man of Flowers*, in which the even older, nuttier Charles (also played by Norman Kaye) writes self-addressed letters to his dead mother, *Lonely Hearts* portrays eccentricity as a trait released from timorous, repressed men during middle age when their mothers die, though neither film makes the mothers castrating, smothering dragons. Peter starts getting sprightly even during his mother's last rites, putting on a spiffy suit and a toupee which makes the top of his head, at least, look twenty years younger, then turning the cortege to the cemetery into a mini-car chase. Soon he has joined the dating club, met the skittish Patricia (Wendy Hughes), and made his own foray into art, a role in a local production of August Strindberg's *The Father*, presided over by a gleefully waspish gay director. But as we see more of Peter and Patricia (whose sexual inexperience makes her every breath an agony of mortification and fear) and meet others in their lives (her intrusive parents, his goofy brother-in-law, and his institutionalized father, among others), the thought gradually arises that Cox wants something more than a simple Australian derivative of Ealing-style fubsiness.

This feeling emerges most clearly during three scenes which, amid the whimsicality that surrounds them, seem all the more charged with incongruous pain. As Peter and Patricia, whom the director has lured into the cast of *The Father* (ironically, since her own father is her major bedevilment), run lines together in his apartment, she, still terrified of sex yet nervously fascinated as well, decrees that they will sleep together platonically. But when Peter cannot restrain himself from attempting to make love to her, the scene turns into a comic and dreadful paradigm of a disastrous first time, as he has to shoo his dachshund

away, bare ass in the air, and she loses her shaky composure and flees. Afterwards, they blend their own psychodrama with Strindberg's during a deftly written rehearsal sequence, as he pleads in vain for a reconciliation with a naked intensity that unexpectedly reveals his depth of feeling (and foretells John's naked grief in *My First Wife*). In a tailspin, he gets caught shoplifting in a mortifying way, then returns home to discover that his dog has shit on the floor. Describing these pratfalls this way must make them sound ridiculous and so they are—until Peter's sudden, welling anger leads him to a harsh denunciation of everything humiliating about life's daily, undistinguished, pathetic round. As the movie also shows (in a lighter way) during an inopportune visit by Peter's brother-in-law while Peter is trying ineffectually to negotiate with a friendly outcall hooker named Raspberry, life seldom allows us to have satisfyingly clear-cut emotions; the banal dailiness of existence will usually adulterate them; yet, bewilderingly, it can also heighten their humanity.

In *Man of Flowers*, eccentricity becomes almost tropically lush. Thanks to a large inheritance from his mother, Charles can now construct and live in his own enclosed world; the money enables him, as he tells Lisa (Aly-

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son Best), the nude model, to “collect beauty and possess it.” For him, this means, along with his elegant home, classical music, female nudity, and (above all) flowers, which he buys in lavish bouquets for himself, cultivates painstakingly, and presses into books. Nor does he separate these elements of his life; they form the substance of his sexuality, which one visualizes as a humid rainforest choked with exotic plantlife. Yet Charles looks like the very prototype of the conservative, genteel bachelor, dry as a Saltine; at times, in his dark topcoat and fedora, he eerily resembles the Buster Keaton of Samuel Beckett's *Film*.

Norman Kaye continually extracts bemusing comedy from the contrast between Charles's vestryman exterior and his calm, unfazable outrageousness. When Charles, in an art class, portrays Lisa covered with tuberous stems and blossoms despite the teacher's admonition to paint like a strict realist (“Imagination is the word people use,” she says grumpily, “when they don't know what they're doing”), he threatens to “punch you in the nose and plead artistic freedom all the way to the Privy Council.” Later, he stands nude in his spacious sunken bathtub matter-of-factly asking a call-in radio sexologist whether one may properly consider flowers “arousing, tender, loving beings.” When a statue salesman (Patrick Cook) babbles to him about a scheme to save cemetery land by encasing corpses in copper, Charles listens soberly, and when he proposes that Lisa and her lover Jane (Sarah Walker) undress and kiss each other while he watches, all in the hope of curing his premature ejaculation, his meek, uninflected voice heightens the atmosphere of ozone-like perversity. No wonder the call-in guru, though wacko enough himself, can only gasp that Charles has “a sense of humor I do not share” and the art teacher (Julia Blake) is left staring at him in utter puzzlement and murmuring, “What a strange little person you are.”

Charles moves even deeper into hothouse weirdness (a session between him and his shrink, played by the film's cowriter Bob Ellis, has them mingling manias and switching roles so fluidly that off-the-wall doesn't begin to describe it—it's off-the-planet). But Cox is not really interested, as I mistakenly thought,

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in making Charles just colorfully “dotty” in some sentimental-amusing way. People like the art teacher and the call-in host may be satisfied to write him off as one more screw-loose, but others are struck to find themselves drawn to Charles. His eccentricity turns out to be remarkably liberating for them, not only because it encourages their own frozen possibilities but also because it coexists with a deep-seated kindness and tolerance, a shy eagerness to help and to understand. For instance, Charles’s young mailman (Barry Dickens) can’t even deliver a gas bill without reeling off a harebrained spiel about the state of the universe (“The whole world’s completely fucked” is his signature line, but the cheeriness that he puts into it is elating). Most people would undoubtedly dismiss or avoid him, but Charles recognizes a kindred spirit, and when the youth blissfully prattles one day about “how far do you go in the way of compromise with obscene world around you,” Charles wryly adds, “Or within you.” Because Charles truly believes that “the most unexpected people have a lot of wisdom,” he is always ready when that wisdom presents itself, no matter how unlikely the source.

More significantly, his influence freshens Lisa’s life. Initially, she is caught in a sterile relationship with David (Chris Haywood), a

formerly trendy painter who now spends all her money on nose candy. But, before that, we get to watch her strip for Charles while the “Love Duet” from *Lucia di Lammermoor* washes over her golden figure. Surely, there has never been a more liquidly sensual striptease in the history of film. Softly lit by Yuri Sokol (who in other scenes of all three films uses a very drab palette to create a context for their protagonists’ bizarre behavior), Lisa is as caught up in erotic fantasy as Charles is, using this heady piece of sex-theater to tap her own banked sexuality (though Charles never touches her and even objects when she kisses his cheek once) in a way that she has no hope of doing with David. Unlike most others (including David, who comes to a comic-horrific end when he tries to blackmail Charles), she lets herself see the gentlemanly humanity behind Charles’s outré facade, and this insight (which the movie leaves unstated) plainly emboldens her to dump David at last and then accept Jane’s longstanding invitation to try a lesbian relationship—a development which the movie treats as an endearing blend of casualness, embarrassment, and warmth that is utterly typical of Cox’s intelligent straightforwardness about all sorts of sexual encounters.

But *Man of Flowers* also shows how eccen-



MAN OF FLOWERS: A reverly scene.

tricity traps Charles. Like John, he lives partially in a state of dreamy fixation on his past. ("Dreams take up nearly half your whole life," he muses, literally mistaken yet poetically correct.) His reveries focus on his childhood, when he was, by his own visualization, a soft, plump, unruly creature obsessed with nude statues in parks, the cleavages and bare backs of lady guests at his parents' tea parties, but most of all by his mother (Hilary Kelly) and the musk of primal nurturance and intimacy that his recollections of her still exude. Unlike John's, Charles's cherished images are not losing their power, but this power is also as frustrating as the transience of John's dreamworld. Cox had filmed these images, as he did the dream montages in *My First Wife*, with shaky pans, jagged cuts, faded smears of color, and snatches of opera in lieu of natural sound effects. The difference is that he has also made them exquisitely funny—and their most hilarious touch is undoubtedly the casting of none other than Werner Herzog as Charles's prim, skinny father, who is always pursing his lips in abhorrence of the nasty boy and twisting his ear while dragging him away after Charles has disrupted tea by brazenly staring at a lady's plush flesh or openly fondling it. (Kaye, Ellis, and Cox all worked on Herzog's Australian movie, *Where the Green Ants Dream*, whose wayward bits of Cox-like humor are its only successful feature.) I have never seen images of childhood on the screen so richly permeated with commingled memory distortion, poignantly lost deep emotion, and exhilarating lunacy, all in miraculously perfect suspension.

We understand perfectly why Charles is so bewitched by them and why he writes, "My imagination frightens me."

Peter and Patricia settle down to domesticity and John remains adrift as *Lonely Hearts* and *My First Wife* end. But Charles finds an enigmatic zone of his own. After disposing of David's blackmail scheme with typically dry effrontery, then declaring that he can be a friend but not a lover to Lisa, Charles walks onto a grassy hillside, virtually a silhouette in his topcoat. Two similar figures are already there, and another enters the frame as the camera rises to disclose a vast seascape. The four shadows against the green iridescence gaze motionlessly out over the ocean for many moments, as Donizetti plays and Charles intones, "Some people are so helpless in this world, some are so alone." Clearly, Charles does not consider himself one of them, and at first this seems leadenly ironic. After all, he had earlier admitted to Lisa and Jane that "it is hard to see yourself as others see you, or to see yourself at all." But as the magical image holds and the music irradiates this dreamscape, the irony fades, and we realize that Charles is entirely right—he is anything but a lost soul.

My First Wife contains a humbler, more likely to be overlooked, yet equally moving motif. Twice, John gently adjusts Lucy's arms while she is struggling with her cello. The first time, John initially seems to be ignoring her, exactly as Helen said, working self-absorbedly at his desk while she flounders. The second time, a potentially ugly quarrel begins to flare up between him and Helen during a recital by the children's orchestra. Suddenly realizing that he might ruin the performance and embarrass his daughter, John falls silent and then glides over to her. The way he lifts her arm grants him the peace he has been so feverishly clawing after, if only for a moment—unexpectedly, mysteriously, like one of Robert Bresson's infusions of divine grace. In each case, the camera is attentive to Lucy as she accepts the correction silently and plays on. Playing on is all the peace that Cox's work thus far has to offer; at his best, however, he knows how to make it more than enough.

NOTES

Biographical and production data, as well as Paul Cox's quoted statements, come from the following:

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Karen Jaehne, "Coming Up Roses: Director Paul Cox, Man of 'Flowers,'" *The Washington Post*, July 7, 1985.

Raymond Stanley, "Cox, Hargreaves Work Together On 'My First Wife,' My Most Commercial Yet, Says Dutch-Born Director," *Screen International*, May 12, 1984.

_____, "Paul Cox," *Lonely Hearts* biographical note, Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1983.

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The Samuel Goldwyn Company distributes *Lonely Hearts* in the United States. The American distributor of *Man of Flowers*, *My First Wife*, and *Cactus* is Spectrafilm.

KAREN JAEHNE

Schrader's *Mishima*: An Interview

For about ten years, Paul Schrader and his brother, screenwriter Leonard Schrader, have worked on a film about the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. After producing 40 novels, 18 plays and 20 volumes of short stories and essays, Mishima committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide) in the office of the highest-ranking military officer of Japan. Mishima flaunted a self-styled samurai image, with a claimed devotion to the Emperor, but it was laced with

homosexuality, despite his wife and two children. He held the allegiance of a corps of cadets he had trained to follow him around—the Shield Society. Out of such potentially controversial and colorful biographical details, the Schraders could have made a bot-boiler that would have titillated the world.

Leonard Schrader lived and studied and married in Japan; Paul Schrader knew Japan fairly well from his study of Japanese cinema and his first screenwriting credit for *The Yakuza* (1975). Their interest in Mishima led them into long negotiations with Mishima's widow and with his literary executor, a Korean named Shiragi. Ultimately, they created not the simmering, gay-bashing bio-pic the world had expected but rather a coolly modernistic and abstract study of Mishima's life reflected through his literary interests—manifested in slices of drama drawn and condensed from three novels that were not put off limits by Mishima's family (who were censoring all the salaciously appealing aspects of his life). *The Temple of the Golden Pavillion* (1956) set up the "chapter" in the film entitled "Beauty," in which beauty becomes the hero's enemy. From *Kyoko's House* (1959) came the chapter "Art," in which a debilitating sadomasochistic relationship rises out of economic necessity. *Runaway Horses* (1969) yielded "Action," about a fiery young would-be assassin intent on striking a blow against capitalism. Finally, in "The Harmony of Pen and Sword," Schra-

